

A Tribute to Alice Munro at the Annual Conference of Canadian Studies in German-Speaking Countries, February 14-16, 2014

Caroline Rosenthal

I will never forget October 10, 2013. That day I was down with a bad cold. I was lying in bed doing home office and my best to get better and catch up on work at the same time, a tissue box to my left and a thermos with hot tea to my right, but eventually, I switched off the computer and the telephone and had a nap. When I woke up two hours later, I felt like Washington Irving's proverbial Rip van Winkle who had overslept an essential turn in the course of history: My answering machine was flashing, there were several new messages on my cell phone and 20 new messages in my email inbox. Something truly major had happened: Alice Munro had been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, an event Canadianists around the world had been waiting for, and now the public relations office of my University was desperately looking for their Canadianist because 2 local newspapers wanted interviews. After several loud hurrahs in private I gave the interviews via the phone – I sure am glad this wasn't a videophone because I looked like Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and hadn't washed my hair in two days.

So Alice Munro had won the Nobel Prize of literature, this quiet little lady who had often stated in interviews that she started writing short stories – the genre she is undisputed queen of today – because she had to fit her writing into household chores and bringing up three kids. This was a great day indeed for Alice Munro but also for the genre of the short story, for Canadian literature, for women writers, for women writers who are mothers – to put it in a nutshell, for all these things that in the past had often been belittled or at least had not received due recognition.

But of course there is so much more to Munro's skill in writing short stories than the fact that she started her writing career as a housewife. She is a master of the genre because in her stories she invests the quotidian and banal with deeper meaning and reveals the extraordinary in ordinary lives. As Russell Smith said in *The Globe and Mail* shortly after Munro had received the reward:

Munro [...] is incredibly subtle. Her simple and direct sentences convey troubling information indirectly, obliquely. They describe, rarely explain. The stories contain secrets, and so do the perspectives of her narrators and protagonists; the secrets – often quite murderous – take some time to be perceived. They are small in scale, too: They do not concern global geopolitics or new technology. They are set in very – you might say extremely – unglamorous locales. (n.p.)

Indeed, most of Munro's stories are characterized by their small-town setting and their regional focus on Huron County, Ontario, where Munro has spent most of her life. She was born in the small town of Wingham in 1931 where her father was a fox and mink farmer and her mother a former schoolteacher. In 1951, she left the University of Western Ontario where she had begun to study English and journalism, to marry fellow student James Munro. The couple moved to Victoria, B.C. in 1963 and opened the bookstore Munro's Books, which is still thriving— and I bet now more than ever – in downtown Victoria. After the divorce from her first husband she married the geographer Gerald Fremlin and the couple moved back to the small town of Clinton, Ontario, a three-hour drive away from Toronto and an hour away from the place Munro was born in. In a 2004 interview, Munro said about this region:

It means something to me that no other country can -- no matter how important historically that other country may be, how 'beautiful,' how lively and interesting. I am intoxicated by this particular landscape. I am at home with the brick houses, the falling-down barns, the trailer parks, burdensome old churches, Wal-Mart and Canadian Tire. I speak the language. (Merkin 1)

This, I think, is the key to her success: She speaks the language of the region and its people in a way that makes her fiction real.

Munro has been compared to Chekov because little seems to happen in her stories in terms of plot but then, suddenly and powerfully, a character has an epiphanic moment, a deep revelation at the end of the story which, however, does not lead to changes in action but which remains hidden under the surface. As Munro said about her own writing:

A story is not like a road to follow ... it's more like a house. You go inside and stay there for a while, wandering back and forth and settling where you like and discovering how the room and corridors relate to each other, how the world outside is altered by being viewed from these windows. And you, the visitor, the reader, are altered as well by being in this enclosed space, whether it is ample and easy or full of crooked turns, or sparsely or opulently furnished. You can go back again and again, and the house, the story, always contains more than you saw the last time. It also has a sturdy sense of itself of being built out of its own necessity, not just to shelter or beguile you (xvi-xvii).

Alice Munro skillfully creates fictional spaces that can be revisited again and again and that with every visit reveal new meaning. Jonathan Franzen was one of the many fellow writers who recognized and praised this. In 2010 the German political magazine *Der Spiegel* ran an interview with the American writer. On being asked 'who is the greatest living American author', Franzen replied: 'Alice Munro, but she is Canadian.' Puzzled, the interviewer broached the subject again by asking, 'but isn't it a scandal that Philip Roth hasn't received the Nobel Prize yet' and Franzen replied, 'No, the scandalous injustice is that Alice Munro, who

has been writing marvelous short stories for 40 years, has not received it yet' (Matussek n.p.).

At 82, Alice Munro is the author of 14 books of short stories, the winner of numerous literary prizes including The Governor General's Award (twice), The Giller (twice) and the Man Booker for lifetime achievement. *Dance of the Happy Shades*, her first short story collection, was published in 1968 and won Munro her first Governor General's Award in 1969. In 1971 she published her only novel *Lives of Girls and Women*, though some regard it as a short story cycle as well. In 1978, Munro's collection *Who Do You Think You Are?* was published which earned Munro her second Governor General's Award for fiction. Since the 1980s, Munro has published a short-story collection at least once every four years and has established a very impressive oeuvre. Two of her stories from the collection *Hateship Friendship Courtship Loveship Marriage* were adapted for the screen. Sarah Polley's tremendously successful 2006 film *Away from Her* is based on the story "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" and the title story of the collection was turned into the movie *Hateship, Friendship*, directed by Liza Johnson in 2013.

As a student, I gobbled up Canadian literature – Margaret Atwood, Daphne Marlatt, Audrey Thomas, Margaret Laurence, Carol Shields, Ethel Wilson, Aritha van Herk (and yes, a few male writers too) Rudy Wiebe, Robertson Davis, Michael Ondaatje, – but I never really found access to the writings of Alice Munro. Part of this was due to the fact that while in a novel you get used to the tone, the narrative voice, the setting, the array of characters once and for all, with each new short story you have to start all over again – and back then I wasn't ready for that. Books shape our lives, reflect our lives and often are the landmarks in and of our development. Some books we read again 20 years later and suddenly understand them in different ways because we have changed, our lives have evolved, we have made new experiences. It was like that for me with the writing of Alice Munro. I needed more life experience but even more so a broader reading experience to appreciate that Munro is a master of describing things by understatement, by meticulously rendering drama in an explicitly undramatic way. Our biggest catastrophes after all take place in human interaction and communication or the failure thereof.

So Alice Munro is a writer you can read anew in every decade of your life. Make an investment and buy her books, they will last you a long way.

Bibliography:

Matussek, Matthias. "Freiheit ist ein Verkrüppelter Begriff." *Spiegel.de*. Der Spiegel, 25. Jan. 2010. Web. 17. Feb. 2014. <<http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-68785463.html>>

Merkin, Daphne. "Northern Exposures." *NYTimes.com*. New York Times, 24. Oct. 2004. Web. 17 Feb. 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/24/magazine/24MUNRO.html?_r=1&>

Munro, Alice. "Introduction." *Alice Munro: Selected Stories*. Toronto: Penguin, 1998: i-xvii.

Smith, Russell. "Alice Munro's Nobel Prize Gives an Unloved Genre Its Long-Awaited Due." *TheGlobeandMail.com*. The Globe and Mail, 12. Oct. 2013. Web. 17 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/alice-munros-nobel-prize-gives-an-unloved-genre-its-long-awaited-due/article14834516/>>